

Modern Swiss architecture

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Modern Swiss Architecture.

"The Architect and Building News" has published in its issue of the 20th September, the following appreciative article; pointing out some of the reasons why our architecture has such an excellent reputation for sightliness as well as for comfort and durability:

Mr. H. W. Fowler, in an excellent little book entitled *Modern English Usage*, gives all sorts of help and advice to those who wish to write and those who have to write. One section of his work, an all too penetrating section, supplies a list of obvious phrases which should be avoided because they are irritatingly commonplace. No doubt it is a little cheap, for instance, to head a few remarks on foreign architecture by such a truism as "appearances are deceptive." But, after all, when that phrase suits the purpose, why should one avoid it? And in this case at any rate, it serves as an introductory warning to those who, familiar with the physical characteristics of a people, would then proceed to deduce from them the qualities of their art or architecture.

What stroller in the streets of Berlin, for example, would suspect the Teutonic soul to be steeped in sentiment which finds satisfaction in music in extremes varying between the haunting cry of the "Flying Dutchman" and a faithful rendering of nightingales in the forest as supplied by obese oboe-players in a popular Berlin beer-hall? Nothing, either, of the architectural romance of Nuremberg or Rothenburg is suggested by large numbers of citizens with cropped heads and stupendous necks. And yet, between the art and the individual, the link exists.

Something of the same surprise at the difference between the man and his expression in architecture is occasioned also in Switzerland, where the gay neatness of the houses, bright in colour, trim and cosy in winter, flower bedecked in summer, somehow suggests a race of bright little alert people, vivacious and sparkling, and wearing exclusively peasant costumes of the type that exists to-day chiefly on dolls in toy-shops. Instead of that, we find a race of people who, for all their sterling qualities, are not over endowed with superficial attractiveness; rather prosaic, one must admit it, inclined to heaviness, exuding more solid virtue than captivating charm.

In architecture, however, that understanding of beauty in form and line which is basic, that sympathy with decoration which is human, are expressed by the Swiss in sufficient abundance to show that warmth of expression lies below a slightly chilly surface. Romance, even, is revealed, but it is of a special type: the romance of the solid worker, of the tidy-minded.

The Swiss architect, at any rate of to-day, has these attributes. He must, in fact, acquire them if he is to succeed in architectural practice; for he has more solid work to do than his English confrère, and Swiss methods of practice make demands not only on artistic ability but on technical knowledge of a very workmanlike order.

In Switzerland, to begin with, there is no quantity surveyor and no general contractor. Not only does the architect specify the work for each trade in very full detail, but he also makes out a separate bill of quantities for each section. In obtaining a price for the job, he personally obtains tenders for all the trades involved, and these, lumped together, form the contract sum. In a sense, therefore, the architect is acting as general contractor, and all the tenderers are acting as do sub-contractors in this country. The result is, of course, a saving of the general contractor's profit on all sub-contracts. But the architect has far more work to perform, and is responsible for the co-ordination of all the trades involved. In compensation, he receives on the whole a slightly higher fee than is provided for by the R.I.B.A. scale of charges.

One corollary of this method of obtaining tenders is the absolute necessity of completing every single detail of the drawings before the work starts, since only in this way can close tendering be obtained, and there is no margin of percentage or overhead profits which can be played with by the general contractor in his effort to offer a reduced bid. Another indirect result is that the client has to make up his mind before building is begun, in all the details, and knows very well that if he changes heart it is going to cost him dear.

The architect, however, is obliged to make extremely full drawings, and detail every item down to the smallest points of construction. He is therefore obliged to be very conversant with materials and the technique of each trade. The result is that he rapidly becomes extremely practical, and has a chance of showing it in innumerable drawings; for it is not uncommon for a job of about £10,000 to require nearly 1,000 sheets!

The fact that the Swiss architect is compelled to have a really thorough knowledge of building practice is undoubtedly one of the factors which accounts for a certain sanity which prevails in Swiss architecture. One is far less "naughty" in design when the burden of execution falls on

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one's own shoulders! This trend towards architectural common sense fortunately does not exclude the element of charm and phantasy, even romance; it simply means that these qualities are introduced where they appear as logical accompaniments to plans and elevations which are basically simple. The result is architecture which is solid and reasonable as regards fundamentals, but expressing the humanities in its modelling, in its general character of proportions, and in lighter touches of detail which do not obscure the broader appeal of structural rightness and sincerity.

Architecture of this type is not confined to public buildings, churches, big business offices, of which so many good examples have lately been erected in Switzerland. We find it expressed, too, in buildings of a humbler commercial character, such as factories and warehouses; for in buildings of this class the Swiss, like the Germans, are beginning to excel.

We have chosen, to illustrate modern achievement in this direction, a fine warehouse building on the outskirts of Basle, a work in which the geometrical truth and sincerity which lie at the root of modernism are combined with a sensitive appreciation of appeal to the eye through dignity of form which is not devoid of a touch of picturesqueness and romance.

This great brick Rheinhafen warehouse is an example of clean Swiss design. It is of a fine pale colour, rising sheer from the water-side above a lofty stone retaining wall. Its steep-pitched roof lends to its bulk a touch combined of homeliness and grandeur, a suggestion of the house, a hint of the great cathedral. Of cleverness in the design there is plenty of evidence, as, for example, in the tracery of the tall shallow arches, which lighten the severity of the flank, and the horizontal banding which relieves the tower-like end, with its uneven masses of void and solid, from any danger of weakness or ungainliness. This building, extremely impressive in its combination of finer composition, with attention to such practical points as the orderly arrangement of loading and despatch by road, rail, and water, provides in addition a romantic accent in the landscape.

In the Bâle Fair building we have a commercial structure which essays to maintain romance and something of the softness of tradition through playfulness of detail and gaiety of colour. It has good lines, good scale, a fair balance in its parts, and a certain lack of homogeneity; but this latter is redeemed by the unity of its granite dressings, pink plaster walls, and the focal point of gay orange within its central portico. Such a building might so easily have been vulgar; instead of that, it is compounded of an easy mixture of old and new, and its long facade, set off by two lofty granite lighting pillars is an element of agreeable street design without claiming to be a masterpiece either of tradition or modernism.

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